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Pearl Harbor survivor Phillip Willis dies at 76

Pilot captured 1st U.S. POW of WWII

By Joe Simnacher
Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

Phillip L. "Phil" Willis, 76, whose patrol captured the United States' first World War II prisoner the day after the Pearl Harbor attack, died Friday of leukemia at his Dallas home.

In civilian life, Mr. Willis served two terms in the Texas Legislature. His amateur photos taken during the Kennedy assassination were studied by the Warren Commission.

Mr. Willis was honored in Dallas in December with a Pearl Harbor Day fly-by of vintage aircraft. He had told friends that he wanted to see a fly-by before he died.

The Kaufman native was stationed at Bellows Field in Hawaii on Dec. 7, 1941, when the Japanese

attacked Pearl Harbor.

Second Lt. Willis was still in the tuxedo he had worn to a farewell celebration at the officers' club just hours before the 7:55 a.m. attack.

That Sunday he had planned to escort the body of a close friend back to Tulsa, Okla., for burial. He planned to remain on the mainland and get married in a few weeks.

"At first, we thought somebody was playing hell on maneuvers, but then we saw the red ball on the sides of the Japanese Zeros," he told *The Dallas Morning News* in 1975.

Short of sleep and suffering the effects of partying into the morning, Mr. Willis couldn't find his shoes and opted for his cowboy boots. Please see WWII on Page 37A.

WWII war veteran, legislator Phil Willis dies at 76 of leukemia

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boots.

"We Texans die with our boots on," he recalled telling a friend at the time.

Assigned to the Army Air Corps' 86th Observation Squadron, Mr. Willis initially saved his aircraft by quickly getting it airborne during the first attack. Hugging the tree-tops in his unarmed aircraft, he saw the Zeros buzzing all over Pearl Harbor. The next morning, his plane was destroyed in a second attack.

Afterward, Mr. Willis — staying awake on coffee, cigarettes and adrenaline — took a group of enlisted men to patrol the beach for an anticipated invasion of Japanese soldiers.

The Japanese used five two-man submarines as part of the attack. Mr. Willis' beach patrol captured a Japanese sailor, Kazuo Sakamaki, who had sought refuge on the beach after his sub hit a reef. The sailor was America's first prisoner of World War II and the only one of the Pearl Harbor attack, according to Walter Lord's book *Day of Infamy*.

Just 23 and fresh from flight school, Mr. Willis moved quickly from observation aircraft to fighting aircraft, eventually flying 52 combat missions in a B-17 bomber.

Because of a back injury he suffered when he was shot down over the Pacific, Mr. Willis retired in 1946 as a major. He was 27.

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— Phillip L. Willis,
recalling Pearl Harbor

He shot down eight enemy planes, sank four ships and received 16 citations, including two Silver Stars for gallantry in action and a Distinguished Flying Cross. He lost no crew members during two bomber crashes.

When he returned to Texas, he enrolled at North Texas State University, now the University of North Texas, and earned a bachelor's in government in 1948. He was elected to the Legislature in 1946 and 1948. He and his brother, Doyle Willis of Fort Worth, are the only brothers to have served in the Texas House simultaneously.

After serving in Austin, Mr. Willis worked in the real estate business, built civil defense shelters and sold new cars.

On Nov. 22, 1963, Mr. Willis again witnessed history, this time in Dallas with his wife and two daughters.

The family selected a position at the end of the JFK parade route to avoid the crowds, he said in the book *Pictures of the Pain*, by Rich-



Phillip L. Willis ... served two terms in the Texas Legislature.

ard B. Trask.

"I figured that would be the ideal spot," he said in the book. "I wanted them to see him and get some pictures. I had no idea what I was getting into."

Mr. Willis' motorcade photos of the assassination moments were studied by government and private researchers. He and his daughter Linda Kay later testified before the Warren Commission.

Mr. Willis is survived by his wife, Marilyn Willis of Dallas; two daughters, Linda Kay Pipes of Houston and Rosemary Roach of Amarillo; his brother, Doyle Willis; and four grandchildren.

Services will be at noon Monday in Restland Funeral Home's Memorial Chapel. Burial will follow in Restland Memorial Park.

Memorials may be made to the Leukemia Society of America, 2651 N. Harwood St., Suite 240, Dallas, Texas 75201.